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CRIMINAL JUSTICE HEADS NATIONAL COUNCIL ACTIONS

NEW YORK -- The Governing Board of the National Council of Churches has adopted a new policy statement on criminal justice, approved a fact-finding mission to the Middle East as a condition for the withdrawal of a resolution accusing Israel of human rights violations and calling for the suspension of all U. S. aid to that country, and launched a year-long re-examination of the NCC's purpose.

The 266-member board, representing 32 Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican communions whose members number more than 40 million, meets semiannually to set policy for the council.

The Episcopal Church is represented by 16 persons, including the Rt. Rev. John M. Allin, Presiding Bishop; the Rev. William A. Norgren, Associate Ecumenical Officer; the Rt. Rev. John H. Burt, Bishop of Ohio and chairman of the Church's Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations; and Miss Sonia Francis, Broadcast Officer, and a Vice President of the NCC as chairman of the Communication Commission.

The Governing Board spent most of a day on a lengthy policy statement titled "Challenges to the Injustice of the Criminal Justice System: A Christian Call to Responsibility."

The 21-page document, which was approved by a vote of 72 to 17, with seven abstentions, argues that the present system may do more to perpetuate violence and disrespect for law than to halt it, and advocates sweeping changes in the way the U. S. deals with crime.

Incarceration should be minimized, the paper argues, while alternatives such as fines, mandatory community service and restitution to victims should be used more widely. Criminal codes should be revised to free them of present race, class and sex bias, and certain actions that do not injure another person should be decriminalized.

To achieve such sweeping reforms, the statement acknowledges, American society must be virtually transformed. Christians are called to work for a society that emphasizes human worth over material values, places the social good above self interest, distributes wealth more equitably, ends class, race and sex discrimination, and assures adequate housing, health care, education and employment.

The most heated debate came over the theological underpinnings of the paper. Father Norgren said that the majority of the Episcopal Church delegation voted in favor of adoption of the statement, though some members had raised questions about the theological section. Bishop Burt said the amended title of that section, "A Christian Reflection on Justice," made it generally acceptable to most members of the Episcopal delegation.

The Lutheran Church in America unsuccessfully attempted to delete the entire theological section, objecting that it was based on a Reformed or Calvinist theological supposition that was incompatible with Lutheran doctrine. The Rev. William Rusch, Director of Ecumenical Concerns for that Church, explained, "We believe that an ecumenical document from the National Council of Churches should seek to create a theology that transcends" any particular tradition.

The resolution accusing Israel of human rights violations, which was withdrawn, proved to be the most controversial item before the board. Introduced by the small Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, many of whom trace their roots to Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, the resolution called for the suspension of U.S. aid to Israel.

At the recommendation of a special panel of National Council leaders created earlier to deal with Middle East matters, the board voted instead to consider the issues raised by the Antiochian Archdiocese as part of a six-month period of intensive study leading to the development of a new Middle East policy.

That process, designed to produce a document for a first reading by the board at its next meeting in Cincinnati in May, 1980, will include a fact-finding trip to the Middle East by the special panel. Open hearings will also be held in this country to solicit input from any interested groups, as well as informal meetings with Jewish leaders, Arab Christians and others.

The present policy of the National Council of Churches, which dates from 1969, affirms both Israel's right to secure borders and the Palestinians' right to self-determination and a national entity.

Opposition to the Antiochian resolution had been led by the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the Synagogue Council of America and other groups.

On the first day of its semiannual meeting, the board adopted a framework for the 1979-1981 period and launched a year of in-depth discussion about its purpose.

In its new framework, the board recognized the need -- while continuing its long-standing service, education, social action and ecumenical work -- to reaffirm and more clearly articulate the biblical and theological basis of its work.

The document establishing the new framework enumerates a number of particular issues that deserve attention, including disarmament, bioethics, human rights, economic inequities and the needs of children and families.

The council has also pledged to take a new look at its ultimate purpose and at the commitment of its member communions. "This will not be a simple exercise of finding new ways to describe what we already are," according to the framework document, "but it will raise deeper questions about our continuing as we are and a probing search for what we ought to become."

The board voted to receive without comment and transmit several documents on ecumenical commitment to the member-churches for in-depth discussion over the next year, one of which proposes that the National Council constitution be changed. In particular, the new wording would define the council as a "communion of churches" rather than the present "cooperating agency of Christian communities."

Father Norgren said the Episcopal Church delegation was not convinced that "communion of churches" is the most satisfactory term to describe the National Council of Churches. However, the document will now be discussed by the Church's Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations, the Executive Council and perhaps other appropriate groups during the next year, according to Bishop Burt.

In other actions, the board:

- Called for Christian action to counter the influence of the Ku Klux Klan and cross burnings, and urged government investigation and prosecution of those responsible for Klan violence.

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- Called for a complete moratorium on the use of Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides and related chemicals containing dioxin, pending further scientific study of their effects.

- Urged the U.S. government to press for implementation of President Carter's offer of assistance to Kampuchea (Cambodia), and commended member-churches to provide maximum assistance to the people of that tragic country.

- Urged the U.S. government to pay the medical fees for American citizens exposed to the 1945 atomic bomb explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as provided in H.R. 1129 and H.R. 1924, or other adequate legislation.

- Voted support for the United Farm Workers' continuing lettuce boycott.

- Urged U.S. action to guarantee self-determination for Micronesia, a U.S. trust territory.

- Approved support for President Carter and the United Nations Security Council for their efforts to secure the release of Americans detained in Iran.

- Called for free and open elections in South Korea, as well as an immediate release of all political prisoners and other moves to encourage democratic renewal and the restoration of human rights.

- Supported the release of four members of the Republic of New Africa movement who are currently in jail in Mississippi.

- Opposed government plans to convert the 1980 Winter Olympic village into a federal minimum security prison after the games.

- Supported ongoing investigations of the impact of a July spill of 1,100 tons of radioactive material in New Mexico.

- Urged renewed efforts by the churches and the U.S. government to end world hunger.

- Called for negotiations between the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy and the New York state and federal governments to resolve the current confrontation at the Mohawk community of Akwasasne.

- Approved support for the human rights of prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.

- Paid a tribute to the late Dr. Samuel Sandmel, former professor at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and a major contributor to Christian-Jewish relations in the U.S.

- Adopted a 1980 budget of \$25,444,130, an increase of less than half of 1 percent over 1979.
- Voted several measures to strengthen the National Council's commitment to racial justice in its staffing, funding and programming.
- Heard an evaluation of 10 years of council action on women's concerns and issues.
- Called on the U.S. churches to observe in 1980 the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Sunday School movement.
- Sent a message of gratitude and encouragement to Archbishop Oscar A. Romero, Primate of the Roman Catholic Church in El Salvador, who had expected to address the council but had to cancel because of the continuing crisis in his country.
- Approved a letter to the Rev. Obispo Federico Pagura, President of the Latin American Council of Churches (in formation), pledging that the member-churches would work for greater justice in U.S.-Latin American relations.
- Approved a letter to a delegation from Nanking University, Nanking, People's Republic of China following their recent visit to the National Council.
- Authorized the extension of the Incarcerated Veterans Project of the Division of Church and Society until July 31, 1981, providing operating funds are available.

In addition to Bishop Allin, Father Norgren, Bishop Burt, and Miss Francis, members of the Episcopal Church's delegation to the Governing Board are: Bishop William H. Clark of Delaware; Dean Elton O. Smith of Buffalo, N. Y.; the Rev. William James Walker of St. Louis, Mo.; the Rev. John H. Bonner of Chattanooga, Tenn.; Mr. George McGonigle of Houston, Tex.; Mr. Eric Scharf of Portland, Maine; Dr. William Day of Reno, Nev.; Mrs. Owanah Anderson of Wichita Falls, Tex.; Mrs. Lewis James of Des Moines, Iowa; Dr. Helen Louise White Peterson of Portland, Ore.; and Mrs. Alice Emery and the Rev. Winston Ching of the Episcopal Church Center staff in New York City.

Substituting for absent members were: Bishop Milton L. Wood of the Episcopal Church Center, for Bishop Allin; Mrs. Jean Jackson of Lake Oswego, Ore., for Mr. McGonigle; Mrs. Carolyn Pollie of Virginia Beach, Va., for Father Ching; and the Rev. William Weiler, Associate Ecumenical Officer for Washington Affairs, Washington, D. C., for Dr. Peterson.

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NOTE: Editors who need the full text of any of the documents or resolutions referred to above for in-depth reporting on particular issues may send requests to the DPS office.

Adopted a 1980 budget of \$25,444,130, an increase of \$1,000,000 over 1979.

A 1980 survey conducted in connection with the National Council's membership study showed that 10% of the members were women.

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